Milk River Basin Focus Area

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in Montana

Introduction and General Description

In Montana, the short-grass prairie lies under the "Big Sky" and stretches from the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains eastward to the Dakotas. These vast rolling high plains grasslands are broken by isolated mountain ranges such as the Little Rocky and the Bear's Paw Mountains and drained by large rivers, including the mighty Missouri and Milk. Another dominant feature, the Missouri Breaks (the rugged hills along the Missouri River), forms the southern boundary of the north-central Montana plains and runs west to east along the Missouri River corridor. North of the Milk River and eastward to the State line, along what is now called the "Hi-Line", the land has relatively high densities of depressional wetlands or "prairie potholes." These grassland-wetland complexes are especially important to migratory wetland birds both during the summer reproductive season and annual migrations.

Prior to settlement, this "sea of grass" was a land of bison, pronghorn, elk, deer, grizzly bears, wolves, swift fox, prairie dogs, and black-footed ferrets, along with a host of grassland birds. Receiving less than 13 inches of precipitation annually, the land was once subject to raging fires and seasonal grazing by roaming herds of ungulates. Today the land is still impacted by periodic drought and fierce blizzards.

Livestock ranching and farming now dominate the prairie, but the face of eastern Montana seems ever-changing. Many small farms and ranches are gone and the human population is declining. Sadly, some rural communities have begun to wither and die. Economists and civic leaders speak passionately of the need for long-term sustainability and resource stewardship in this fragile landscape.

Pintail drake.

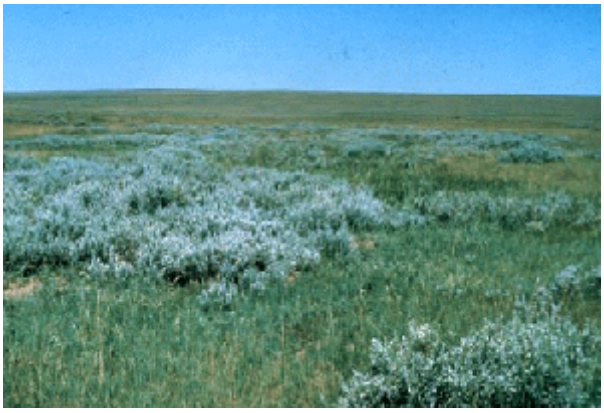
Species of Special Concern

Many populations of grassland birds and mammals are in sharp decline. Black-tailed prairie dogs (candidate species) are much reduced, and their associated species, the black-footed ferret, is endangered. Populations of other species of northern plains grassland vertebrates, such as swift fox, mountain plover (threatened), long-billed curlew, sage grouse, burrowing owl, Sprague's pipit, Baird's sparrow, lark bunting, and chestnut-collared longspur are in various degrees of chronic decline. The Breeding Bird Surveys, which began in the mid-1960s, indicate The North American Breeding Bird Survey, which began in the mid-1960s, indicate consistent widespread declines of grassland birds across most of their breeding range. Populations of at least 13 grassland bird species dropped significantly between 1966 and 1996.

Furthermore, populations of prairie nesting northern pintails (a duck) have been dropping since the mid-1950s. Prolonged drought of the late 1980s and early 1990s saw pintail breeding populations fall to 1.8 million birds, their lowest numbers ever recorded. In 1999, following 5 years of excellent water conditions the pintail population rebounded to 3 million birds, but this figure is still far below the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) objective of 5.6 million breeding birds. Researchers speculate that much of the pintails' major prairie breeding range in Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, and the Dakotas has been altered by modern agriculture. Fortunately, many parts of Montana still have exceptionally high nest success due to extensive tracts of rangeland and grasslands enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program. Also this Focus Area has a coyote dominated environment with relatively few red foxes, raccoons, or striped skunks (nest predators). This geographical area with intact ponds and grasslands remains a critical recruitment area for pintail populations.

Threats

Plowing, overgrazing, fire suppression, tree encroachment, invasive exotic plants, altered predator populations, and control of black-tailed prairie dogs have all combined to make native grasslands the most extensively altered biome on the planet. In the Milk River Basin Focus Area, all of these issues present serious threats to native prairie quantity and quality. Recent conversion of native grasslands to cropland has been most severe in north-central Montana, especially above the Milk River. The degrees of threat (from highest to lowest) of grassland conversion can be ranked geographically across the State: 1) from the Hi-Line (Milk River) and northward, 2) from the Missouri River to the Milk River, 3) between the Missouri River and the Yellowstone, and finally, 4) below the Yellowstone River.



Conservation Strategies

The Fish and Wildlife Service, especially the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, recognizes that the future of prairie wildlife populations depends, in part, on long-term land use by private landowners. The goal of this native prairie conservation initiative is to preserve and restore the grassland-wetland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable ranching, native wildlife and vegetative diversity, and the associated ground and surface water supplies.

As described above, the Northern Great Plains is one of the richest grassland bird communities in North America; and north-central Montana is the center of species radiation of endemic prairie birds. The Montana Partners-In-Flight Bird Conservation Plan lists a number of declining grassland bird species needing conservation action. Many of these species inhabit north-central Montana. Grassland-wetland complexes in north-central and northeastern Montana have been identified as critical waterfowl habitat by the NAWMP, and both areas have been designated as Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Areas. The Nature Conservancy, in their ecoregional planning document, also recognizes the grasslands and wetlands north of the Missouri River as "Ecologically Significant Areas." Sizable tracts of publically owned (Bureau of Land Management and State School Sections) native prairie also exist in north-central Montana. These large, intact prairie areas are the critical cornerstones for maintaining healthy prairie wildlife populations.

Montana landowners play a significant role in maintaining productive grassland-wetland landscapes and stable wildlife populations. The availability of surface water is a limiting factor for wetland wildlife and cattle.

Restoring wetlands and establishing shallow stock ponds can significantly increase duck production, provide valuable waterbird and shorebird habitat,

and also benefit ranchers. Within the Milk River Basin Focus Area, the primary conservation actions on private lands are to: 1) restore and establish wetlands and wetland complexes within areas of extensive existing grassland nesting habitat, and 2) design and help ranchers implement conservation grazing systems.

The cost to restore or establish wetlands in this Focus Area is $500 per acre and the cost for grassland enhancement is $10 per acre.

The Milk River Basin Focus Area covers 3 and one half counties: the northeastern half of Hill County above the Milk River, and all of Blaine, Phillips, and Valley counties. There are two priority Core Areas: 1) the grasslands and wetlands (prairie pothole country) above the Milk River in north Blaine and north Phillips Counties, and 2) the grasslands below the Milk River and north of the Missouri River in southern Phillips County.

Partners

In addition to private landowners (ranchers), our partners include:

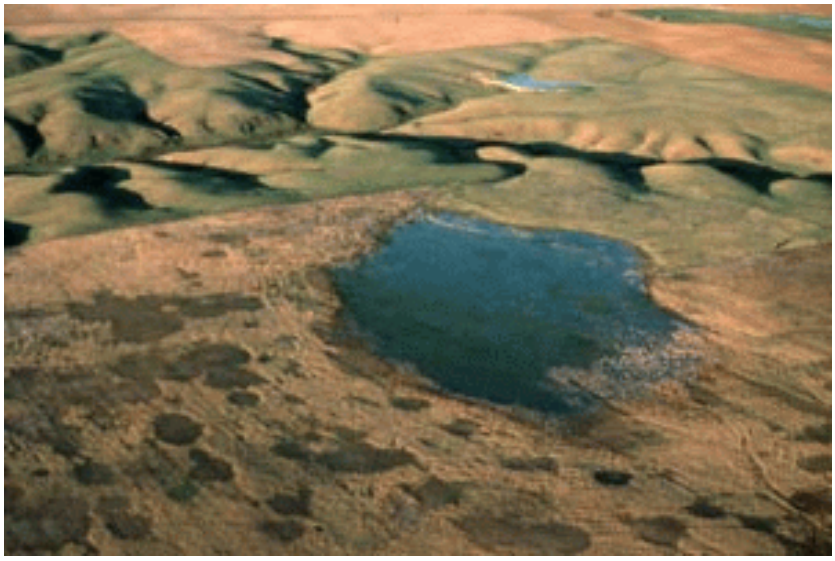
Bureau of Land Management
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Native American Tribes
North American Waterfowl Management Plan - Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
Land and Water Conservation Fund
Partners-In-Flight
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Ducks Unlimited
The Nature Conservancy
Pheasants Forever
Defenders of Wildlife
Non-governmental private land trusts

Accomplishments (1989-2000)

- Restored 3,200 acres of wetland on 375 sites.
- Enhanced 36,000 acres of uplands on 65 sites.

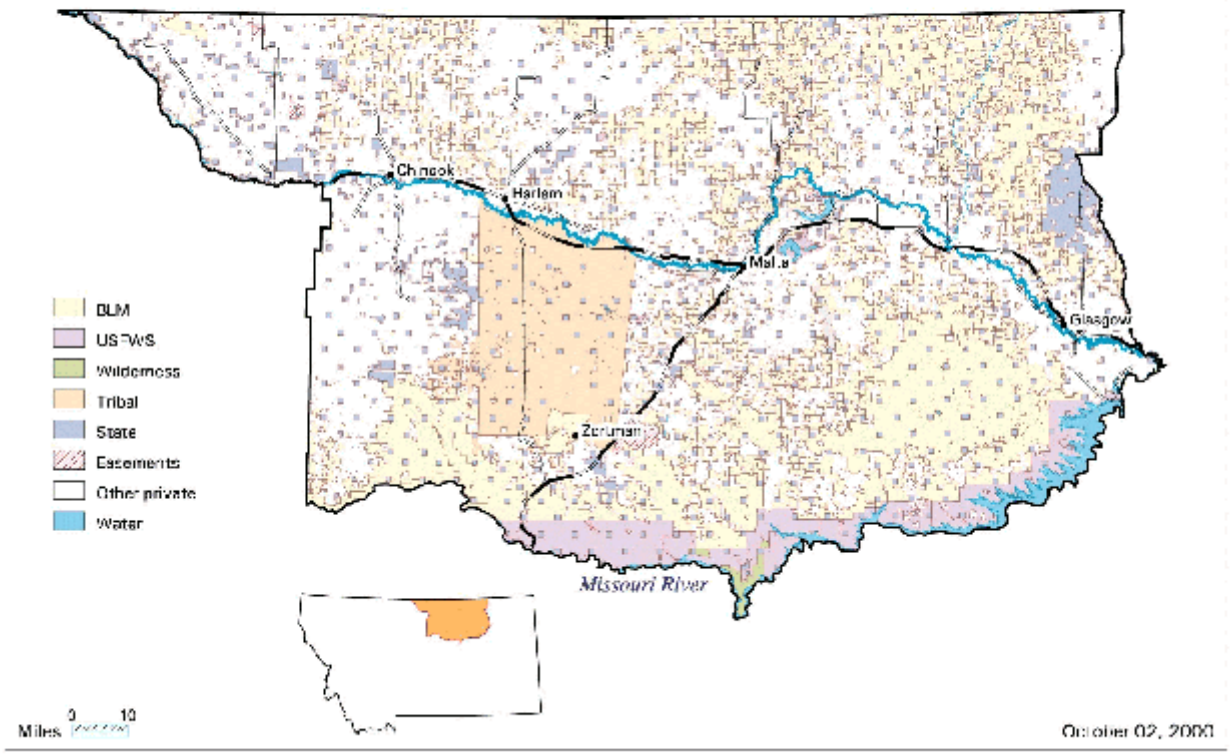
Future Needs

- Restore and/or establish 3,000 acres of wetland on private and tribal lands.
- Restore or enhance 250,000 acres of grasslands on private and tribal lands.



A 15-acre wetland restored with help from the Partners Program in a Conservation Reserve Program tract.

Milk River Basin (8,850,000 acres)



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